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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of magazine success and failure as demonstrated by two regional magazines, "Southern Living" and "Southern Voices." The former, a combination of articles about food, travel, sports, and other positive aspects of southern life, was quickly accepted by its readers and advertisers and began earning profits within four years. The latter, which was committed to in-depth commentary on the South's social, economic, and political affairs, was beset by financial, advertising, distribution, and design problems and eventually folded. (KS)

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Southern Living and Southern Voices:

Models of Regional Magazine Success and Failure

Presented at the Fifth Annual Meeting of the

Popular Culture Association in the South

Oct. 7-9, 1976 in Knoxville, Tenn.

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Southern Living and Voices: Models of Regional Magazine Success and Failure
Presented at the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Assn. in the South
by John W. English, School of Journalism, University of Georgia.

Although the South has fostered its share of exceptional writers, the region has never been known for its great journalism, especially the magazine variety. Two case studies of regional periodicals offer some fresh insights into the complex world of big-business publishing as well as into the not-so-sophisticated mass media audience in the South.

Let's begin by looking at a phenomenal success story: Southern Living (SL). Southern Living was first published in 1966 by the Progressive Farmer Co. in Birmingham, Ala. Progressive Farmer already had 80 years of editorial, advertising and circulation expertise to draw on and its first direct-mail solicitation letters for SL netted 200,000 initial subscribers, (The return rate was an astonishing 9.2 per cent per 100; the usual is about 2 to 4 per cent.)

Southern Living was evidently modeled after Sunset magazine, a regional publication in the West catering to the lifestyle there. O.B. Copeland, the first SL editor and now assistant to the president of the parent company, believes that the magazine began writing about "what they knew about"--food, homes, landscape and nearby travel-vacation-recreation spots. "Southern Living would have gone down the drain if we had dealt with the issues of the region--racial troubles, economic or international issues," Copeland admits. "We would have to have had higher priced editorial talent to do that. So we didn't try to compete with national magazines."

Copeland noted that the magazine early discovered that its readership was 60 per cent women and that they worried about being just a "woman's magazine," so sports and outdoors sections were added to broaden the editorial scope and widen the advertising base. Special issues devoted to camping and football are regularly scheduled facets of the current editorial policy.

"We took a positive approach," Copeland continues, "on the belief that Southerner were ready for a magazine that communicated with them. We have never taken and still don't take stands on issues. In fact, the magazine has no editorial page. We think it's better to have an article on family camping in the Smokies than to editorialize against the rising divorce rate. We felt it does more good to take a positive look at the enjoyable aspects of Southern life."

As any casual reader of Southern Living will detect, the positive approach editorial policy translates into content ranked by classification: food, 19%; travel, 18%; gardening, 16%; building, 13%; cultural interest, 11%; home furnishings, 8%; sports, 8%; general interest and other, 7%. Southern Living publishes 62 recipes per issue, more than any other national women's magazine on the market.

Southern Living's formula clicked with its readers and advertisers and within four years the magazine was earning tidy profits, a phenomenal feat in the risky field of publishing. Copeland believes that simplicity is the key to its success. The makeup and design is simple and clean. More than 80 per cent of its editorial content is staff written. About two-thirds of the stories run in the 500 to 700-word range, while the few longer ones rarely exceed 1500 words. Staff writers adhere to the provincial line and only try to "whet the appetite of readers," never satisfy them.

In terms of advertising markets, Southern Living covers the A and B markets (incomes above $15,000) while Progressive Farmer strives for C and D coverage. Southern Living's track record in gaining both regional and national advertising is certainly enviable, partly because it now reaches 1.2 million subscribers in a 16-state region for a very high penetration level. Regional advertising can be pinpointed to target groups in as many as 400 specified editions (such as Metro Atlanta only) but generally the magazine runs about 100 different breakdowns each month.

In 1975, Southern Living sold 1200 full pages of advertising, ranking 20th among all magazines in the country. Since the company attempts to maintain a ratio of 54 per cent advertising to 46 per cent editorial content, a number of issues each year go over the hefty 300-page barrier. In fact, some readers are now complaining that the magazine is too big and awesome, Copeland admits.

Like any successful executive, Mr. Copeland proudly boasts about his firm's business acumen. "Synergism" within the company is the way to prosper, he says. Each section of the magazine has spun off book divisions, which earned $44 million in sales in 1975. "We also own the only complete list of U.S. farmers," Copeland notes, and the company mines that list to sell products, mail-order insurance and other services to farm folks. The company also runs its own computerized subscription fulfillment service, a 600,000-list of book buyers and two other publications--Antique Monthly and Decorating and Craft Ideas. Ingeniously, material sent in from readers gets multi-use. Readers' recipes, which flow in at the rate of about 5000 a month, are both published in the magazine and then recycled into cookbooks, which

also are successful. Quilt block designs submitted to a contest are kept and reprinted in a book. And so on.

While the company is privately owned and refuses to make its bottom line profit margin public, a cursory examination of its income potential is impressive. Advertising rates are moderately high at $8,640 for a black/white page and $12,220 for a four-color page. When considered in context of the 1200-page annual volume, then advertising revenue rivals subscription income: $7 per times 1.2 million (and a high renewal rate). By any estimate, Southern Living's figures spell respectable profits.

Southern Voices:

A recession year, such as 1974, may not have been the best time to start a new magazine. Yet People magazine and Rustler did it successfully. So did The South, a business-oriented magazine out of Tampa. In March of that year, the first issue of Southern Voices made its appearance. The bi-monthly, general-interest magazine emerged when the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Council decided to combine its two small publications--New South and South Today--into one. The new magazine was committed to in-depth reporting and commentary on the South's social, economic and political affairs, reflecting the research and goals of the council (the South's oldest bi-racial group devoted to civil rights).

The magazine's prospectus boldly announced: "We feel the time is propitious and appropriate for publication for such a magazine. It will reflect the growing awareness of Southerners of advantages their region has over others, a reasoned and realistic self-confidence and determination to hold to and improve on those advantages--what we have come to call a new Southern consciousness."

SRC's new publication had many things going for it. The reputation of the council as a reliable and accurate source of information about the South was a major asset. Its extensive library and research department were also valuable resources for the magazine editors. Staff contacts throughout the region were already established. Even financial support seemed solid. As a non-profit, tax-exempt organization, SRC had received a grant from the Ford Foundation to subsidize the magazine's founding and partial subsidy was assured until the magazine become self-supporting.

The economics of starting the magazine were critically significant. Business manager James N. Wood Jr. said that Richard Benson, a direct mail consultant for such magazines as Psychology Today, was engaged to initiate the subscription drive. Benson's plan was to send out 1 million direct mail letters to southerners (at a cost of $110,000) with the expectation of getting a response rate of 4 per cent or 40,000 subscribers. A sample test-mailing offering a membership package similar to the Smithsonian Institution's Smithsonian magazine was tried, but rejected because of poor results. Thus, SRC was offering six issues of the magazine alone for $5. Subscription payments were not only expected to finance a second massive mailing, but also net about $50,000 in operating funds.

The hitch in Benson's plan was that the mailing lists he used contained many duplications, since they were taken from disparate sources. Some potential subscribers received as many as nine solicitation letters, while many received two or three. "We should have done a 'merge purge' to clean up the lists," Wood said in a recent interview. "We could have saved about $40,000 and would have reached twice as many people in the process." Wood now believes he should have waited another six months before publishing while these details were worked out. Nonetheless the campaign generated 17,000 paid subscriptions and an additional 4000 to 5000 came in once publication began.

Securing advertising presented even more problems for the new publication. Wood hired a New York representative who worked for Penthouse, but the rep's background was in radio advertising and he was unable to persuade Madison Avenue agencies to place national accounts in a regional publication. The small circulation was a major drawback for national advertisers. Yet the Southern Voices staff also made virtually no efforts to lure in regional or Atlanta accounts. Hence, little advertising was actually sold. Even the ten pages or so that did appear in each issue were mostly freebies, given away to lend the appearance that the magazine was an advertising medium. The fact was, little revenue came in from advertising. "We didn't do enough planning on the advertising side," Wood now says. Mistake number two.

Distribution was also fumbled. Newsstand sales were consistently poor, mostly because the covers lacked a strong logotype, no strong identifying motif from the region, small "soft-sell" cover lines referring to its editorial content. One cover of a black woman reportedly had difficulty getting newsstand display in provincial areas. In short, the magazine's design did not aid its initial marketing. Wood

admitted that even though the $1.50 magazine was given away to the dealers, they still didn't sell.

It may seem somewhat ironic that Southern Voices was printed by Oxmoor publishers in Birmingham, when one realizes that Oxmoor is a subsidiary of Progressive Farmer Co. Oxmoor submitted a 40 per cent lower bid than the other two printers, Wood explained. Southern Living's O.B. Copeland confirmed that the printing was negotiated on a "strictly business proposition." Copeland said he thought the magazine was doomed from the start because it was "zeroing in on a snobbish, educated audience" and because its capital was just "not enough money to survive."

Editor Pat Watters acknowledges that the project was "undercapitalized" but he figured they could squeak by if advertising came through. Rising costs of printing, paper and postage also made expenses more than original projections. "It was a mistake to go the big magazine format with slick paper and four-color and all, thinking we were going to get advertising," Watters now says. He also credits the recession and inflation as major factors in the magazine's quick demise: "When the stock market went to hell, foundations cut back and the continuing subsidy we expected just dried up. At the same time, SRC's operating expenses nearly doubled and staff had to be laid off."

"There were only three of us on the editorial staff full-time and we worked our butts off," Watters went on. "Generally, I'd say that the magazine did reflect the philosophy we set out. The response from readers was remarkable. But the most heartening thing of all was discovering a lot of hungry writers in the South. When we suspended publication, we had over 200 manuscripts on file and most of them were printable."

Southern Voices' editorial mix was full of surprises: poetry, fiction, essays by known writers and first-rate reportage. Convicts and college students contributed work as did such pros as T. Harry Williams and John Egerton. The subjects covered were unlimited: a treatise on cornbread, reflections by a North Carolina Ku Klux Klansman, an essay on growing up Jewish in the Bible Belt, an account of the last Grand Ole Opry show at the Ryman, and perceptive pieces on Cajun culture and the role of black women in the South.

Watters remains proud of the editorial content of Southern Voices. He cites Joe Cumming's profile of Greene County, Ala., Tom Wicker's article on Sen. Sam Ervin and Bill Hedgepath's piece on the "spacemen" from Pascagoula as significant new journalism that wouldn't have been published elsewhere.

But Watters is also quick to point out: "Writers should never start a magazine. While he doesn't believe that there is a connection between editorial content and business success or failure, he say's he certainly didn't know as much about the design and business aspects of magazine publishing as he should have.

Allen Freeman, the former managing editor, also believes the words (or articles themselves) reflected the original philosophy, but that the design at first warred with the words for the reader's attention. "After we had the magazine redesigned, made it less showy and less New York Magazine, the editorial content worked better. I guess we went too far in assuming that readers wanted things that were challenging. Pat Watters didn't want to cater or stoop down to readers and I agreed with that. I suppose those words could have been produced in a respectable magazine at a much lower cost, but once we put out a quality product, we didn't feel we could change. There was some talk of turning the magazine into a tabloid newspaper and continuing publication, but we rejected that idea. Yet, the loss of the magazine was a tragedy.

Watters is still convinced that the South is the best place for a regional magazine, and figures that one's chances for survival are better now with increased Southern consciousness. Jim Wood also thinks the magazine may have just been ahead of its time: "A lot of people read the magazine and saw what was written about the South and were excited by it. Even our criticism was written with love and respect. We believed in that magazine and took a gamble with it and failed."

In many ways, the plight of Southern Voices was hinged to the status of the Southern Regional Council, the 32-year old race relations "think tank." When the magazine plunged $80,000 into the red, the SRC had no contingency funds to bail them out, much less back an additional $100,000 direct mail campaign. The magazine sought support from its readers by encouraging renewals even before the first year's subscriptions expired. About 25 per cent of the 22,000 subscribers sent in renewal checks, counting on the magazine to begin publishing again in the Spring of 1975.

But those additional funds were not enough to sustain the magazine and SRC decided to fold the operation after only four issues. Further, they offered renewing supporters an opportunity to either receive alternative SRC publications, or to donate their payment as a tax-deductible gift or to wait on a cash refund. Most opted for the refund, but Wood says that they are still waiting for their checks. The council has never sent back a penny of the $70,000 due its faithful subscribers.

Since then, SRC's woes have steadily mounted. Its budget plummeted from nearly $1 million a year to half that. Executive director George H. Esser Jr.,

exhausted and dissatisfied with the state of affairs, resigned after laying off about a third of his staff. Today, the council's commitment to social change is impaired by its lack of funds, small staff and uncertain future. "No one wants to fund the real need," says Wood, "and that's to educate white folks."

An addendum: Regrettably, the story of Southern Voices is more typical of magazine publishing than that of Southern Living. In fact, Magazine Publishers Assn. has done a study on chances of a new magazine's survival and reports that just more than 70 per cent of such ventures fail. Perhaps if the Southern Regional Council had been aware of the high risk involved, its staffers would have taken more time and cautious steps to insure its success. Since the death of Southern Voices, the South remains without a regional magazine of substance, creating a vacuum into which a Clay Felker will someday move with a New South.